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Of Mice and Men; Steinbeck's Parable of Aspiration and Desperation

Abstract: Steinbeck, a great social reformer, and his greatness lies in his empathy for common people—their loneliness, joy, anger, and strength, their connection to places and their craving for land. His *Of Mice and Men* is a compelling story of two outsiders striving to find their place in an unforgiving world. Present paper highlights Steinbeck's depiction of passions and repressions of proletariats; their dreams and devilments and their incessant struggle for land bringing for them untold sufferings pain and misery.

Key words: Proletariat, Capitalism, Means of Production, Craving for land, Misery,

Frustration, Death .

“Sustainability of bourgeois depends upon the means of production”

(Communist Manifesto)

According to Marxism, a capitalist society has two basic structure; the bourgeoisie and the capitalist. The bourgeoisie has the means of production while the proletariat use the means of production while generating wealth for the bourgeoisie. Property relation changes with historical condition. labour is the source of all the material wealth. so capitalist can't allow

him to be independent by acquiring means of production. John Steinbeck in his novels *Of Mice and Men*, *Grapes of wrath*, *The Pearl* and *In Dubious Battle* high lights the genuine loneliness and tragedy of dispossessed Americans. *Of Mice and Men* is especially the story of two plebeians George and Lennie who got trapped in a merciless society that is ruled by inhuman capitalist. The book presents the hopes and despair of the migrant labor trapped in California during the time of depression. Like many californian migrant labor George and lennie cherish a dream of having their own land, a symbol of social status and independence. In 1930,s American farm owner needed itinerant laborer to harvest seasonal crops. These ranch workers ,generally hired on low wages and forced to live in unhealthy , unhygienic and inhuman conditions .Resulting tension mounted between states' agribusiness and the under paid, exploited and oppressed agricultural laborers. *Of Mice and Men* is the saga of the exiled laborers who marched from the drought plagued South west and poured in to the golden state of California, “the promised land “ in the expectation of employment , in the orange groves and lettuce fields and earning a stake of money, sufficient for their own land. Steinbeck ,who many a time dubbed as a communist writer, presents a grim picture of the bourgeoisie society in which wage laborer is devoid of his own fruit of labour .bourgeois has money ,the ruling power and proletariat who is without means of production has nothing to sell , only his labour. Reduced to a mere “ commodity” he is bought and used by the capitalist, for whom he is not a living thing but “a lifeless constituent of product”. Just for other commodities, which are necessary for life, labourer has to sell his free life. The proletariat works for all the six day without any rest. Bourgeoisie wants to make the working day as long as possible. Devoid of light, air and proper ventilation production houses are a kind of “terror house”. Divison of labour, use of means of production by the labour and working hours all are decided by the capitalist. Doing same kind of function for the years his body turns into an automatic machine unable to think and react.

Due to industrial revolution, agricultural peasants reduced to labourer and from labourer to wage labourer, further in the interest of the capitalist. Marx is right when he says, big farms, ranches became the organized mode of “crushing out the workman’s individual vitality freedom and independence”. In this social set up other necessities of life are made so costlier that in order to arrange them everything is spent so preliterate can never have their home and land. Bernard Mandeville, a supporter of capitalism, asserts in his book *The Fable of Bees* that, “poor should almost never be idle and yet continuously spent what they get”. so proletariat has to lead a life of pauperism. John Steinbeck in *Of Mice and Men* voiced the pain and the agony of the American lonely, disposed and nomad population. The very title of the book has been taken from a poem by Robert Burns. The poem tells of an unfortunate field mouse whose home is flattened by a plow:-

But, mouse, thou art no thy lane,
In proving for sight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft a-gley
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain
For promised joy

Similarly proletariat’s dream of own land and home reduced to ashes in the capitalist social set up. Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* articulates the saga of proletarian aspirations and desperations in search of “promised land”. It is a grim tale of itinerant labour, employed on Californian farms, which don’t have their own land so have to work on other’s ranch. The novel presents a less turbulent era of early 1930’s when work was plentiful in wheat fields and groves of America. From 1870’s to 1930 Californian wheat and fruit crops were harvested by itinerant workers. With toted blankets rolls or bindle on their back they used to slept unprotected in the road side jungles. Wages were low and quarters provided to them

were squalid, unhygienic, and unclean and chance for further advancement was fictitious. Even most skilled and perfect workers were failed in their dream of independence and forced to live as ‘bindles’. Thus majority of farm workers of California were a “powerless, degraded, ill paid fraternity”. Steinbeck born in Salinas California in 1902’ worked in fields and grown up listening stories and speeches of itinerant labourer. While working as a bindle himself Steinbeck came across an incident in which a huge and troubled man kill a ranch foreman” get sore” because of his spiteful behavior and provided base for Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. Thus novella is a narrative of ordinary people whose dreams of securing happy homes in the paradisiacal west were often blasted. This opus is a compact and a highly personal response to the powerlessness of the Californian laboring. As a historical account of continuous conflict between the elite and powerless it authentically proves that “ Lennie’s longing for earth is not individual’s craving rather a powerful yearning of all men”.

George and Lennie two bindles, who don’t have their own land search job on the other’s ranches. George is “small and quick” with “restless eyes and sharp strong features” while Lennie is a “huge man, shapeless of face, with large pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders”. Lennie is described in the terms of animals as proletariat is a mere “beast of burden” in the capitalist system. Both have no wife, children and devoid of their own land and home. The most obnoxious thing is that they don’t have proper food to eat mostly living on “Beans that too without ketch up”. George voices the agony of the disposed itinerant labourer when he says,” guys like us that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world’.

In capitalistic society necessities of life is so costly that proletariat left with nothing for the further advancement in life. Whatever is earning in the week all is spent in the end of the week. George words are very true when he says;

“they come to a ranch an’ work up a stake and then go into town, and blow their stake. and first thing you know they’re poundin’ their tail on some other ranch. They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to.”

That was the way of living of most of the nomad labourer living in America during the 1930’s. Nearly all of them cherish the same dream, like George and Lennie, dream of having “a little house and a couple of acres an’ a cow and some pigs and....” Which is impossible to realize in a bourgeoisie society. On ranches live in bunk houses offered by their masters which are unhealthy unclean with poor ventilation system, one single room occupied by eight to ten bucks, and having little belongings like “ soap, talcum powder and razors” articles indispensable for life. George is given a squalid bed with lice. Physical power is more agreeable than the intellectual power. Although Lennie is dull but in strength he can work like an animal so master has no problem in hiring him because, “he don’t need any brains to buck Barley bags”. On these ranches bucks have no private life, no private space they behave like machine, don’t want listener don’t interested in other talk. Candy, the old man, quite right when he exclaims, “A guy on ranch don’t never listen nor he don’t ask no question.” That is the only condition for working long. Money is the bases of bourgeois society and very source of power, political religious mental as well as physical so proletariat superiority in any aspect is unacceptable. Curley, the master’s son, is light weighted and “handy” has an eye on Lennie, being himself light weighted and small in size he don’t like “big guys”. George senses the danger and warns Lennie, “he figures he’s got you scared and he’s gonna take a sock at you the first chance he gets”. When Slim and Carlson another bucks on the ranch make fun of Curley on account of his wife, innocent and poor Lennie becomes the target of his revenge and get beaten by him. In the social structure based on money’ innocent people like Lennie are no longer safe. Lennie although not bright don’t like the place and want to go

away from there. But they can't leave the place because they cherish a dream, dream of having their own land. George knows he is staking the life of Lennie but mutters"

"We gotta keep it till we get a stake we can't help it, Lennie....if we can get jus' a few dollars in the poke we'll shore off and go up the American River and pan gold."

Capitalistic system inculcates a kind of feeling of inferiority in the poor. Working like machines they lose all the charm of life and feel themselves responsible for their plight.

George too thinks himself responsible for his tragedy. He exclaims:

"If I was bright, if I was even a bit smart
I'd have my own little place, an 'I'd be bringing'
in my own crops,'stead of doin' all the work an
not getting what comes up outta the ground."

In capitalistic social set up labour are alien to the product of their labour. As soon as they enter on farm or ranch as wage labourer they get separated from the fruit of their labor. They are not treated as living human being but as a commodity. Bucks on the ranch work for the week and then spend their earning in sex and drinking. But for George their dream is more important and can sacrifice all "fun" and joy for it. Every time day or night, Lennie wants to listen about it and George wants to speak about it:

"Well, its ten acres", said George. "Got a little
Win's mill. Got a little shack on it, an' a chicken
Run. Got a kitchen, orchard cherries, apples, peaches
'cats, nuts, got a few berries. They's a place for alfalfa
And plenty water to flood it."

They want to own a piece of land and having plants, cows, pigs, goats, hens on it so they can have bacon and chicken and can relish the taste of fresh fruits . They have the basic knowledge of commerce and have proposal for further advancement in life. Even Candy, the

old buck, wants to become the part of their dream and asks for the cost of their dream place, which is six hundred. Candy lost his one hand while working on ranch and got two hundred and fifty dollars, fifty more is saved by him and expecting fifty more to come, all the amount which is three hundred and fifty dollars in all, he offers to George for making him a part of their dream, as Candy is quite sure that within few years he will become useless for the master and will be thrown out of the ranch. Candy's fear is:

They'll can me purty soon. Jus' as soon as I
Can't swamp out no bunk houses they 'll put me
On the county."

As Karl Marx in his book *Das Capital* said that proletariat "don't belong to the product" of their labour, similarly Steinbeck make Candy to speak about their sad fate as he says;

"everybody wants a little bit of land, not much. Jus' som'thin' that
was his.

Somethin' he could live on and there couldn't nobody throw him off
of it.

I never had none. I planted crops for damn near ever'body in this
state,

But they wasn't my crops for damn near ever'body in this state, but
they

Wasn't my crops, and when I harvested 'em , it wasn't none of my
harvest."

All the three are quite bemused by the beauty of their dream, and want to keep it a secret fearing that if Curly and his class come to know about their dream they would try to destroy it "they li'ble to can us so we can't make no stake".

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* portrays poor and pitiable condition of the negroes. Crook, a negro buck who is not allowed to eat drink, and sleep with other bucks sleeps in stable house with horses and straw. He misses the brotherhood and human company but at the same time he is aware of the impossibility of George and Lennie's dream and categorise it as every buck's dream:

"I seen hundreds of men come by on the road
An' on the ranches.....nobody never gets heaven
and nobody gets no land".

Above comment not only state the sad predicament of the proletariat but also the hopelessness of their life. Crook also comments on the capitalistic trap in which laborer works for the whole week and then spending it in week end and left with nothing for the future advancement. He speaks about this bitter truth to Lennie:

"yeah?" said Crook, " an where's George now ? in town in a whore house. That is where your money's going.....I seen too many guys with land in their head. They never get none under their hand."

But Crook too can't keep himself aloof from this dream for long and offers his hand to Lennie and George as help on their dreamland. But trapped in the bourgeois society their dream is ultimately busted by capitalistic social set up. First of all, as Crook is humiliated by Curley's wife he becomes aware about the impossibility of their dream and immediately steps backward saying:

"well jus' forget it." Said crooks. "I didn't mean it. Jus foolin'. I would n't want to go no place like that."

And when Lennie , accidentally kills curley's wife, their dream ultimately comes to an end. Petrified George mutters to Candy:

“I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we’d never do her. He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would.”

Now George is certain of his immutable future, of life and death of a nomad labourer. When Candy sulkily says “then _it is all over” he simply sums up his torment in the following words:

“I’ll work my month an’ I’ll take my fifty bucks an’ I’ll stay all night in some lousy cat house. Or I’ll set in some poolroom till ever’body goes home. An’ then I’ll come back an’ work another month an’ I’ll have fifty bucks more.”

Now it is quite certain that Curley and his people going to lynch Lennie. Being a true friend George can arrange only a peaceful death for Lennie. He shots Lennie while he has his sweet dream in his eyes:

“no Lennie. Look down there across the river, like you can almost see the place.”

Lennie obeyed him. George looked down at the gun.....

“you an’ me. Everybody gonna nice to you. Am’t gonna be no more trouble.

Nobody gonna hurt

Nobody nor steal from, em.”

In the words of Howard Levant ,”as a huge, powerful, semi-idiot who kills when he frightened or simply when he is thoughtless, Lennie is a reduction of humanity to the lowest common denominator” Through his careful foreshadowing Steinbeck , very early in the novel, has suggested in the novel that “each dream is going to be doomed”

Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, is a narrative of human craving, yearning and longing for land respect and individuality. We are quite agreeing with Michael Mayor, when he says, Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* presents a striking similarity “between the fate of the mouse and humanity.... Those human efforts and the dreams for the unattainable are ultimately as futile as a rodent trying to perfect his home from the more powerful blade of a plow.”

Steinbeck himself confessed that, “ ... the earth longing of Lennie who was not to represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men”.

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